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ABSTRACT

In multilingual nations, young children learn early about the social and educational importance that adults attribute to different languages. In Malaysia, parents express their values about languages by choosing specific kindergartens. Preschools' language values are reflected in the amount of time devoted and the seriousness of approach to each language, and in teachers' language proficiency. A study explored the environmental contexts of learning values about language in multilingual Malaysian kindergartens. Observational data were collected on five kindergartens. Four of the schools were suburban, most had multiethnic student populations, and each had a different balance of language instruction. Observations focused on the proportion of time each language was used; languages used by children and staff outside of formal instruction; visual classroom materials; and methods of language instruction. At one school, each language was learned by integration, in its own style, by adults who were reasonably confident speakers. At the second school, English was integrated with most of the day's activities, while Bahasa Malaysia was learned in translation. At the third school, both English and Bahasa Malaysia were learned by substitution, more as an academic requirement than as a means of communication. At the final two (predominantly Malay) preschools, the main language was also the language of the home. Descriptions of education and language policies in Malaysia and of each school and its language values are included. (AC)

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LEARNING VALUES ABOUT LANGUAGES IN THE MULTILINGUAL PRESCHOOLS OF MALAYSIA

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In multicultural and multilingual nations, young children learn early about the social status and educational importance that adults attribute to different languages. Some of these lessons are deliberately taught, but many others are indirect, perhaps even unintended. This study explores the environmental contexts of learning values about language in multilingual Malaysian preschools.

Malaysia is a Southeast Asian nation comprising the Malay peninsula (West Malaysia) and two states (East Malaysia) on the island of Borneo. This study was carried out in the more populous mainland part of the country, traditionally called Malaya. Inhabited for many centuries by Malays and by smaller populations of forest-dwelling indigenous people, Malaya became ethnically diverse during the British colonial period when mining and rubber plantation work attracted many immigrants from China and India. Malaysia, which became self-governing in 1957, now is estimated to have about 51% Malays, 38% Chinese, and 10% Indian residents. Malaysia has a rapidly modernizing economy and a high literacy rate, with compulsory education through the primary level; most children complete at least lower secondary school. Government schools use the national language, Bahasa Malaysia (Malay), as the medium of instruction, English is a compulsory subject, and Chinese and Indian languages are taught as optional subjects. The government also regulates language and other curricular policies in private schools such as Chinese schools which must have a minimum number of hours of Bahasa Malaysia instruction. All pupils take the same national examinations which require proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia. Bahasa Malaysia, a Malayo-Polynesian language, is virtually

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identical to the national language of Indonesia (Bahasa Indonesia) and is related to the languages of the Philipines and Polynesia. Unlike Chinese languages, it is inflected and is non tonal.

The formerly English missionary schools, once gateways to higher education, have converted to Malay medium-the few English international schools are attended only by expatriate children. As in many other multicultural nations, language and ethnic policies are volatile issues. Much urban commerce and informal intergroup conversations are conducted in English. Wealthy families, especially from the Chinese community, often send their children to universities in English-speaking countries. Many non-Malay adults, especially urban Chinese Malaysians who finished school before the 1960's, are not able to speak the national language. However, multiracial work contacts and friendships are very common, and most urban Malaysians speak at least two languages; fluency in four or more languages is not unusual. For example, Chinese Malaysians who have ancestors of Hokkien, Hakka or Cantonese background often speak one or more of these languages as well as Standard Chinese ("Mandarin") and English.

While the government determines language policy in primary and secondary school, preschools are in the private sector and do not have government supervision. According to kindergarten administrators, parents' main reason for enrolling their children in kindergartens is to give them a competitive edge in primary school. However, since kindergartens have no regulations or restrictions about language policies, parents also express their values about languages by choosing a specific kindergarten. If they want their children to value English, for example, they may choose an English-medium kindergarten. For wealthy people who often send their children to universities in English speaking countries, an English-medium kindergarten may be the first step toward this goal.

Children are likely to learn, from these choices, which languages are important to their parents. Moveover, once in kindergarten, children will encounter, in their first organized educational experiences, adults who will both show and tell them about the values of

languages, telling them by the time allocated to instruction in each language, and showing them by the visual displays in the classrooms, by the relative seriousness with which each language is taught, and by the adults' own proficiency in the languages they are responsible for teaching. It is likely that these lessons will in turn shape the attitudes children bring with them to primary school and to other settings.

This study uses observational data on five kindergartens, all but one urban, most with multiethnic student populations, each with a different balance of language instruction. Some emphasize English, the language that still predominates in urban corporate life, others concentrate on Bahasa Malaysia to prepare non-Malay children for school or to support Malay culture, while others offer Chinese or Arabic in support of ethnic and religious values. Observations were also carried out in a government primary school first year class.

Observations focused on

*The proportion of time each language was used, both as a medium of instruction and as a subject.

*Languages used by children and staff outside of formal instruction, as in transitional activities and play times.

* Visual materials in the classrooms and the messages they conveyed about the status and importance of various languages.

*Methods of language instruction, including estimates of teachers' knowledge of the languages they were teaching, the presence of instructional methods that promoted intonation and syntax patterns of a language other than the one being taught, and whether isolated words or complete sentences were used in language classes.

Teachers often used methods of instruction developed in one language tradition to teach another language; for example, Bahasa Malaysia and English were taught in ways more suitable to Chinese instruction, resulting in non-standard patterns of speech. In several schools, Bahasa Malaysia lessons were taught by teachers who could not converse in this language and were limited to teaching isolated words and the simplest sentences; children are

likely to absorb the message that their parents and teachers do not value a language highly if it is taught by a person who cannot speak the language. Some Chinese families speak Cantonese, Hokkien or Hakka, while sending their children to kindergartens where Standard Chinese ("Mandarin") is taught.

Islamic revival has led to Islamic kindergartens, where Bahasa Malaysia is the medium of instruction, and the second language is Arabic. Ethnic pride is implicit in these schools, while explicitly they are devoted to universalistic Islamic values. English medium kindergartens, usually found in higher income areas, most resemble American or European preschools. Besides the language emphasis, their educational philosophy is influenced by British and American early childhood education.

Most Malaysian kindergartens hold class every day during the morning hours. Full-day day care facilities are rare, so employed mothers seek live-in full time helpers or rely on family members for child care. Children of employed mothers may be escorted to kindergarten by these caregivers, or may ride there on privately contracted buses.

The section that follows describes several kindergartens, focusing on how each one teaches and shows different lessons about the relative value of languages. All but one of the kindergartens were in Petaling Jaya, a large, densely populated residential and industrial suburb of the capital city, Kuala Lumpur. The other kindergarten is in a village about thirty miles from Kuala Lumpur. Each school has been given a fictitious name.

St. Elisabeth's is the kindergarten that most resembles an American or British pre-school. It is a family business; the director studied at a teacher's college in England and both she and her husband previously taught in English medium Catholic schools before these schools adapted to Bahasa Malaysia medium. The kindergarten is in a large compound of two houses including the director's home. Its attractive grounds are lush with flowering plants, two wading pools, and a large aviary and aquarium. The youngest classes, 3 and 4 year olds, are held in areas that open into the garden, supplied with a water play table, tricycles and other outdoor toys. Five and six year olds have more structured, spacious classroom areas. St.

Elisabeth's is an entirely English medium kindergarten, with only a smattering of Bahasa Malaysia lessons, and optional Chinese lessons for the older group. Of the approximately 200 children at St. Elisabeth's, about 90% are from Chinese families (the Petaling Jaya population is about 70% Chinese Malaysian). The director, an energetic woman of middle class Indian background who is strongly committed to interracial harmony, said sadly that Chinese parents often request a Chinese teacher for their child, asserting that the child will be afraid of non-Chinese adults. When the school was started, they had many children of expatriate families from Australia, Britain and other European countries, but there are fewer expats in Malaysia now as local people have assumed more technical and managerial jobs. At St. Elisabeth's, children are placed in classes with regard to their knowledge of English. Some children enter the school knowing only a few words of English, while others speak it regularly at home. Children are not prevented from conversing in other languages at school, but most of the speech I heard was in English. The school follows a structured schedule of lessons in reading, writing, math, drawing and other subjects, but there are slow, patient transitions between lessons so there is not a rushed feeling. The teachers prepare lessons by writing out a copy of the day's work for each child in individual copybooks. A typical lesson would involve copying, reading names of different fruits, and then coloring a picture of the fruit. The school is bright with posters and children's artwork; nearly all the captions are in English; a few were bilingual, such as a poster on the names for days of the week in English and Malay. A single poster in a 5-6 year old room proclaimed "Bahasa" and featured a list four simple words with pictures. ("Bahasa" which literally means "language" is the popular designation for Bahasa Malaysia among the non-Malay population, as in "She is weak in Bahasa"; Malays tend to find this designation rather slighting and call their language either Bahasa Malaysia or Malay.)

During a Bahasa Malaysia class, the teacher drew a stick figure and asked, in English, for the names of different body parts, for example, "Where is your kepala? (head)" Several simple words were taught: head, body and hand. No Malay sentences were spoken. When children used Chinese pronunciation, accenting each syllable equally, KE' PA' LA' the teacher mildly

corrected them to say "ke PA' la." The children seemed interested in the lesson, but no children in this school were heard to speak Bahasa Malaysia during play or informal activities.

I asked the director if Chinese parents would consider a Malay medium preschool in order to help their children to succeed in primary school. Her answer was that Chinese parents think their children will get enough Malay in primary school anyway, while the standard of English teaching in government schools is perceived as declining. Since the government schools are well equipped to teach Bahasa Malaysia to non-native speakers, parents are not worried. (It is not at all unusual for non-Malay pupils to win top honors in Bahasa Malaysia secondary school examinations.) Thus, St. Elisabeth's is a setting that openly and subtly tells children that English is the language their parents and teachers value for everyday communication and for future eductional and career advancement.

Hibiscus kindergarten is one of several self-designated Montessori schools. The term Montessori is used in Malaysia for preschools that have any individualized activities. The director of Hibiscus completed a Montessori correspondence course and her school includes a small amount of Montessori-like apparatus. Reading classes are also somewhat individualized. This school is in a two-story bungalow with a small outdoor play space. The physical surroundings are more crowded than St. Elisabeth's. About 150 children attend, in five classes of about 25 each.

Bahasa Malaysia lessons were considerably more advanced at Hibiscus than at St. Elisabeth's. *Children in a 6 year old class of 25 children, 17 of whom had Chinese names, were observed copying Malay words in their copybooks and then coloring pictures related to the words. Some children were seen reading books in Bahasa Malaysia at the late first grade level. English instruction was at a similar level; one child was reading <u>Hop on Pop</u> aloud with good pronounciation. Some children were copying from a chalkboard sentences of 6-8 words, with fairly advanced grammatical structures. Children were working in small groups with the teacher shifting her instructions from Malay to English, depending on the language the child was working in. The teachers, none of whom were Malays, used correctly structured and*

accented Malay sentences. According to the director, most of the children had been in this kindergarten since age 3 or 4. She was proud of their accomplishments in languages and reading. *At the 3 and 4 year old nursery level, a singing class included two songs in English – "Ten Little Indians" was one of these! – , two in Malay and two in Chinese. This group was also observed in a number lesson, conducted in English, involving counting sets of objects.*

Of all the kindergartens observed, Hibiscus was the most truly multilingual environment. It appeared to match the seemingly effortless shifting among languages that is common in urban commercial Malaysian settings. The children used appropriate sentence structure and pronounciation for each language. Surprisingly, when I commented to the Chinese Malaysian director about the relatively high level of Bahasa Malaysia instruction in her kindergarten, she replied by bemoaning the declining standard of English instruction in public schools, using the example that her daughter, after several years of primary school, only likes to read books in Malay. It was remarkable that this kindergarten was so effective in teaching Bahasa Malaysia when the director was less than enthusiastic about the language.

The declining standard of English is a constant topic of newspaper editorializing and letters to the editor in Malaysia, where adults educated at the elite schools of the colonial days do indeed speak a more fluent and British-accented form of English than is usual now. Non-Malay Malaysians tend to assume that an English-speaking foreigner would sympathize with some of their nostaligia for the English language standards of colonial times.

Rainbow school was the best example of inappropriate transfer of teaching methods from one language to others. Rainbow , opened recently, had had a total of 30 children and was seeking more. A sign in the office proclaimed, "Register Now! Daftar Sekarang!".–one of the few Bahasa Malaysia displays in the school. I observed the 6 year old class in its Bahasa Malaysia and English lessons. Each of these languages was taught with a method that is traditional in Chinese primary education: group recitation at a rapid pace. Following are excerpts from notes of observations on two days at Rainbow.

On the wall was a phonics chart marked "BUNYI" (Sounds):

	A	E	I	O	U	
B	BA	BE	BI	BO	BU	
C	CA	CE	CI	CO	CU	etc.

There was one of these in St. Elisabeth's's too, titled "Phonics"

The children were having a reading lesson. They recited something which involved some Malay words but had a lot of connecting words I couldn't understand because they were shouting. The boys, especially, were shouting close to one' another's ears. The teacher smiled and said they had long since memorized this.

(Several days later) They were just finishing a math lesson and beginning Malay reading. The teacher held up her book while the children read from theirs the one sentence on each page; for example, "Mereka bermain di kebun—Tupia pandai melompat—Burong menyanyi—Emak pergi ke pasar membeli sayur" (They play in the field-Squirrels are good at jumping-Birds sing-Mother buys vegetables at the market.) The children read these loudly with equal emphasis on each syllable. There was no attempt to teach the Malay intonation pattern. The method of reading is to read each word or phrase like "ke pasar" then to spell and pronounce each syllable, and then to read the word again. This explained what I couldn't understand last time with the reading from the wall chart with the words "satu, dua, tiga, beg, bas, buku, baju, jari, gigi, mata." It goes like this" satu..s..a.. /sa/...t..u.. /tu/./sa'tu'/...dua...d..u.. /du/...a../a/../du'a'/" The tempo was very fast; it sounded like a military marching chant, but the teacher asked for repetitions if the children didn't speak loudly enough. She used Malay instructions along with English "eja..spell....baca..read...baik baik. (well done).."

Next was the English reading lesson with a similar chart. Some sentences were, "Tom is kicking a ball..He is not throwing it...kick...throw" (The root words were at the top of the page.) "The teacher is talking..the children are listening." Again the syllable method is used with no attention to intonation patterns or correcting difficult sounds like "th," which most of the children had trouble with. They all seemed to know how to divide the words into

syllables. The teacher explained that these were both review sessions on the week's work and previous work. She said the children had studied these pages before.

In Bahasa Malaysia, the emphasis is almost always on the penultimate syllable of each word. Furthermore, the ideal of Malay speech is to speak softly and slowly. This principle is even part of religious/moral education curriculum for Malay children, who hear frequent reminders not to speak coarsely or too loudly. (KPM, 1982) Thus, the method of teaching at Rainbow directly contradicts what native speakers of Malay learn about their own language, and contributes to the what Malays perceive as a heavily Chinese accented form of Bahasa Malaysia. Similarly, the local dialect of English known as Malaysian English is recognizable by its syllable stress patterns borrowed from Chinese.

In a government primary school, I observed a first year (seven year old) class during a Bahasa Malaysia reading lesson. Each child in a class of 40 took a turn reading a lesson of about 50 words. The teacher emphasized correct intonation patterns as well as expressiveness and a moderate loudness level of reading.

At Rainbow, a mathematics lesson was taught in a mixture of English and Malay. Homemade posters included some bilingual captions: Colors/Warna, a counting poster with the number words spelled out in Malay, and English reminders of the "Magic Words: Please, sorry, excuse me, thank you". Between lessons, children were heard to speak Chinese as well as brief phrases in English. Two children spoke Malay, a boy of Malay and European parentage, and a girl who was Indian and who was gently reminded once to stop speaking Tamil. I also observed a Chinese lesson at Rainbow attended by six children, five Chinese and one Indian. The children were learning to say and write the Chinese characters of words for family members, and to say and write"Good morning Mother, Good morning father." According to one teacher, some of the children speak Hokkien at home; another teacher disagreed and said they speak Mandarin. Knowledge of "dialects" or Chinese languages other than Standard Chinese ("Mandarin") is considered outdated by many Malaysian Chinese; these languages are only used for communicating with the older immigrant generations. This attitude may be

related to a long term government campaign in nearby Singapore to eradicate "dialects' in favor of standard Chinese.

The two remaining kindergartens observed were attended almost entirely by Malay children. Peaceful Kindergarten, in Petaling Jaya, was started by an Islamic preschool association. This kindergarten is on property adjacent to that of Rainbow, but while the Rainbow director identified Peaceful as being a school for religious teaching only, Peaceful turned out to have a usual preschool curriculum, offering mathematics, and reading in Bahasa Malaysia, English lessons, and religion taught in Arabic. A guide at Peaceful said parents choose this kindergarten because they want their children to learn Islamic values, especially kindness, sharing, cooperation and good manners. The girls wear long dresses and head coverings, and the boys wear long pants, both styles of dress unusual for young children in Malaysia where shorts for boys and short dresses for little girls are usual in all ethnic groups. Boys and girls are in classes together but sit in separate groups. (The guide mentioned that not all Malays who are involved in the Islamic revival movement favor separate schools for girls and boys) The teachers at Peaceful were mainly young women from rural villages, who had studied at religious secondary schools, with the soft-spoken and shy but hospitable demeanor of traditional rural Malay women. (My guide was a young woman mathematics graduate of a British university who joined a missionary (Dakwah) group during her university studies.) The children are frequently reminded to speak gently and to help one another. The school spokeswoman assured me that this was one of the most important values of the school and one that some children needed help with. During a free play time, children ran about freely in separate groups of girls and boys. The atmosphere was cheerful, with no strictness. The style at Peaceful is typical of traditional Malay child rearing, which emphasizes gentleness, reason and positive reinforcement. (Banks, 1989) Along with the Islamic committment to universal harmony expressed by preschools like Peaceful, there is a strong element of Malay ethnic pride and solidarity. The order of importance of languages is Malay, with Arabic a close second, and English a distant third. Organizations like the one that

founded Peaceful have been said to answer a need for traditional values and comfort for the Malays who are rapidly entering the modern, competitive, fast paced and harsh business world. Similarly, Islamic dress (mainly head coverings for women, which have become more prevalent in the last decade) is religiously-based, but has also been seen as a way of asserting traditional values and avoiding sexual harrassment among young women who were formerly sheltered in rural villages, but are now making their way in the urban professional sector. (Nagata,1984)

Finally, I visited a rural village preschool at its opening ceremony. Village Preschool was similar in many ways to a Head Start school in the U.S.A. Although it was open mornings only, it filled a child care need, as many of the children's parents both commuted to work in the city thirty miles away, and relied on grandparents to care for their children. The preschool gave these grandparents a few hours off. The enthusiastic young teacher also stressed learning the alphabet, preparing to compete and succeed in school, and learning important lessons about health, safety and nutrition as goals of the Tadika. In contrast to Peaceful, at Village preschool, friendliness, soft speech and good manners also important but were seen as already developed at home and in the village. Many inhabitants of this village were immigrants from Sumatra, a part of Indonesia with close ties to Malay culture. For these families, whose educational opportunities had been very limited in the past--most mothers had completed fourth grade-- the preschool was welcomed as a means to success for their children. While lessons were mainly in Bahasa Malaysia, some English teaching was considered important in this setting, especially since few of the parents had studied English. Malay pride was nurtured in this preschool, while English was viewed as an asset for later success. At a costume party celebrating the opening of Village Preschool, some mothers showed their educational hopes by outfitting children in costumes such as a University graduation cap and gown, and a mini-business suit complete with necktie and name tag announcing "Official."

Each of these preschool environments shows children that Malaysia is a nation of many languages, some more valued than others by parents and teachers. They may learn several languages, each in its own style, or may learn one in the context and style of another. This contrast recalls Elkind's (1984) concepts, of learning by substitution and learning by integration. At Hibiscus, each language was learned by integration, in its own style, by adults who were reasonably competent at speaking it. At St. Elisabeth's English was taught as a language integrated with most of the day's activities, while Bahasa Malaysia was learned in translation. At Sunshine, both English and Bahasa Malaysia were languages learned by substitiution, more as a requirement for later academic needs than as means of communication. At the two predominantly Malay preschools, the main language of school was also the language of home, while at Peaceful, Arabic was learned in the context of prayer, also familiar and emphasized at home. (The Village preschool children would have learned their first lessons in Arabic and prayer—the two are not separable for Muslims—at home, and later at religion classes in the village). English, at Peaceful and Village, was learned in the mode of substitution or translation, as at Sunshine. For children in these two schools, the need to actually communicate in English would be in the distant future, if ever.

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